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*Research Article*

**Divorce and remarriage in rural Malawi**

**Georges Reniers**

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## **Divorce and remarriage in rural Malawi**

**Georges Reniers**<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The demographic study of nuptiality in African countries is not very developed and often of secondary interest in a discussion of the proximate determinants of fertility. This paper uses unusual marriage history data to examine divorce and remarriage in rural Malawi.

Life table probabilities of divorce range from 40 to 65 percent and are among the highest on the continent. An investigation into the determinants of marital instability using proportional hazards models confirms the importance of kinship systems and female empowerment, but the mechanism underlying the high divorce rates in Malawi is more complicated than that. This is, for example, illustrated in the effect of the polygyny variables. Marriage, divorce, and remarriage are further considered as empowering strategies that women deploy throughout their lives.

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## 1. Introduction

The fierce debate between alliance theorists (e.g., Levi-Strauss) and descent theorists (e.g., Radcliffe-Brown) has generated a vast body of anthropological research on nuptiality and divorce that has not yet found a match in demography (see Parkin and Nyamwana 1987). In this discussion, the most lasting argument is that divorce rates are inversely related to the degree of rights the “wife-takers” acquire over women through marriage payments (Hutchinson 1990). The argument also offers a ready-made explanation for the vulnerability of marriage in populations with a matrilineal descent system. In matrilineal populations, the reproductive potential of women belongs to the lineage of the wife, and that is, among others, reflected in consistently lower marriage transactions. Both these characteristics are thought to undermine the stability of marriages. In addition, matrilineal descent systems are often accompanied by uxorilocal residence after marriage, thereby de facto severing the husband from the resource base of his power and authority. While western observers are often found guilty of inflating the importance of kinship systems (Marks and Rathbone 1983), observations regarding the instability of marriage in matrilineal regions of southern Malawi are remarkably persistent over time (e.g., Mitchell 1956, Phiri 1983 and Kaler 2001).

The demographic study of marriage and divorce is less detailed and often of secondary interest in a discussion of the proximate determinants of fertility (Bledsoe and Pison 1994, Brandon 1990). The absence of adequate data is partly responsible for that. Vital registration systems are virtually nonexistent and matrimonial histories are weakly covered in both censuses and surveys. The standard Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) offer little additional information compared to censuses because they only record the marital status at the time of the survey. The existence of survey data with an extensive coverage of matrimonial histories thus offers an opportunity for the advancement of a demographic analysis of nuptiality dynamics in Africa.

Three views are considered the canvas against which I give meaning to the results obtained here. In highly stylized form, the first and most persistent idea in the literature treats the power and autonomy of women as a mechanism that destabilizes the bond between partners. In the anthropological literature it is the power of the lineage of the wife that is stressed rather than the position of women themselves, but it is often assumed that it also affects the balance of power within the household. In a more economically inspired worldview, increased labor market participation of women is thought to decrease the returns from marriage because it undermines a system of productive efficiency that rests on gender-based specialization in the household (Becker 1991). Though the details of the argument are less relevant in the context of the present study, it encapsulates the same idea that greater (economic) autonomy of women contributes to marital instability. At this level of abstraction, the destabilizing force of

female empowerment is also accommodated by Goode's (1963 and 1993) theory that treats modernization as the root cause for elevated divorce rates.

On the other hand, Goode also believes that modernization and industrialization can contribute to marriage stability in high divorce systems. The assumed mechanism is an increasing pressure on traditional marriage practices (e.g., arranged marriage) that are conducive to instability. This argument is picked up by Jones (1997), who asserts that the increasing autonomy of youngsters (and thus of young women) and a greater freedom in partner selection contributed to the stability of marriages in Southeast Asia. Among Muslims in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, impressive reductions in divorce rates occurred between the 1950s and the 1980s, a period characterized by ongoing industrialization and modernization. A similar argument had already been defended in the 1930s for Japan (Iwasaki 1931). Although these authors attempt to explain changes over time and the present study is based on a cross section, the hypothesis could be maintained that greater empowerment of women contributes to marital stability.

The third hypothesis introduces a life course perspective. In a discussion of marriage and divorce in West Africa, Locoh and Thiriat (1995) maintain that marriage and divorce are two of the strategies that women utilize in their quest for greater control over their lives. The struggle for autonomy is a multistage process in which women first liberate themselves from the control of the paternal household through marriage. The process is completed through divorce, by which they obtain independence from the husband and his kin. First marriage, from that perspective, is a rite of passage to greater self-control and part of a process of female empowerment.

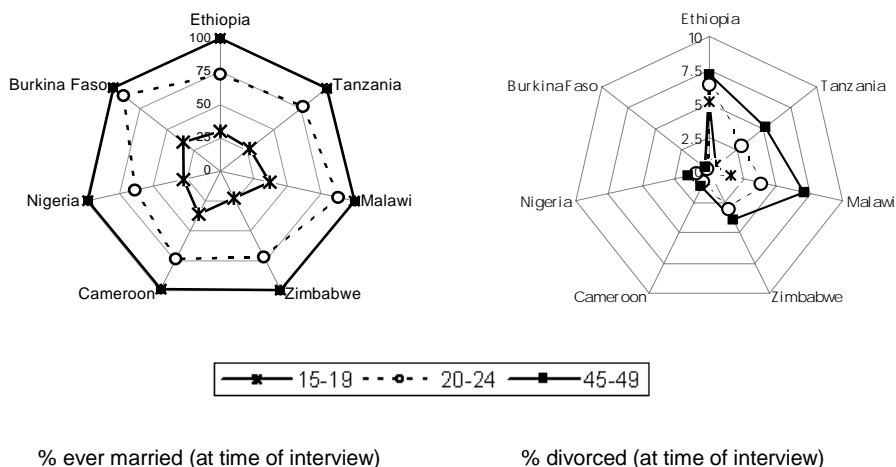
Rather than deriving and testing some of the presuppositions implied in the views just introduced, I let myself lead by some empirical observations on divorce encountered in the literature to see whether they match the results for Malawi. At a later stage, I confront them with the ideas presented above. The choice for Malawi is guided by the availability of adequate survey data. It is of further interest since it falls outside the range of countries that are better covered by studies of nuptiality (Note 1). Malawi is also characterized by an intriguing heterogeneity in religious beliefs and kinship systems.

In the ensuing sections of this paper, I briefly describe the setting and the data, discuss some of the empirical relationships reported in the literature, give estimates of the frequency of divorce and remarriage in the MDICP sample, and present results of an analysis of the determinants of marriage instability. The final part contains an exploration of differences in the residence pattern of women in first and higher order marriages. The latter is an attempt to get an insight into the possibly empowering effect of divorce and remarriage in women's lives.

## 2. The setting and the data

Even by African standards, Malawi is a relatively poor country. It ranks 151st (out of 164) on the Human Development Index and its GDP per capita is \$586 US (in purchasing power parity) compared to an average of \$1,640 for Sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP 2001). In 1998, the life expectancy at birth was estimated at 40 years for males and 44 years for females. Life expectancy decreased slightly between 1987 and 1998 (DHS 2001). With an estimated adult prevalence rate of 16 percent in 1999, HIV/AIDS can be held accountable for that decline (UNAIDS/WHO 2000). The population growth rate in the 1990s is estimated to be around 2 percent. The TFR of 6.2 is still high, but it declined by more than 1 child between 1987 and 1998 (DHS 2001).

In Figure 1, Malawi stands out because of a marriage pattern that is more comparable to Burkina Faso than to the other southern and east African countries. While marriage is virtually universal in all countries shown, Malawi is among the countries where women marry relatively early. In the age groups 15-19 and 20-24 close to 40 and 90 percent respectively have ever been married. Between 1992 and 2000, the median age at marriage for the age group 20-24 increased from 17.7 to 18.2 years (DHS 2001).



**Figure 1:** Proportions divorced and ever married by age in selected African countries (women only, 1998-2000)

Note:  
 Source: Demographic and Health Surveys (<http://www.measuredhs.com/>)

In addition to a pattern of early and universal marriage, divorce is relatively common. Although the percentages reported in Figure 1 are confounded by the speed and frequency of remarriage, Malawi is characterized by a high incidence of divorce. Four percent of the women in the age group 20-24 were divorced at the time of the survey, and among the 45-49 year olds this is around 7.5 percent. These figures are slightly lower than the prevalence of divorce in the sample that is used here. As we will see later, there are important regional variations.

The data used in the remainder of this paper come from the female questionnaires of the second round of the longitudinal Malawi Diffusion and Ideational Change Project (MDICP) conducted in 2001 (Note 2). It is a probability sample of women in three rural districts. In addition to the classical socioeconomic and demographic background characteristics, the second wave of the MDICP recorded matrimonial histories (i.e., the timing and duration of first, last, and one-but-last marriage). Although the survey is exceptional in its coverage of matrimonial histories, it does not include information on cohabitation, on the costs of marriage transactions, marriage negotiations, or a more subtle approach to measuring marriage as a process rather than a discrete event (see Van de Walle 1968, Meekers 1992). When reference is made to divorce, it also includes separation. The combination of both categories is justified by the fact that periods of separation are often followed by divorce. In addition, separation only accounts for around 5 percent of the marriages that ended (Note 3).

The sample size for this analysis is 1342 ever-married women (Note 4), more or less equally divided between the three districts. The Rumphi district in the north is characterized by a predominantly patrilineal system of descent with patrilocal residence after marriage and inheritance traced through sons. The ethnic groups in the south (Balaka) follow a matrilineal system of descent and inheritance, and residence after marriage is most often matrilineal. In Mchinji, in the center of the country, descent is less rigidly matrilineal and residence may be either matrilineal or patrilocal.

Marriage negotiations are less extensive and less formalized in the matrilineal groups in the south than in the north. In these settings, the costs of marriage transactions tend to be lower as well. Marriage transactions are not very substantial in any of the three districts, and the role of parents and kin in the decision-making process is fairly limited. Most often, it is the future husband who initiates marriage negotiations, and the instances where the parents steer the choice of the spouse or the outcome of the negotiations are rare. Women are usually consulted and their opinion is important in the decision-making process. As a result of the ease with which marriage negotiations take place, they usually do not take very long to complete (Zulu 1996, Schatz 2002).



## Sources of bias

Most of the analyses presented here are based on life-table methods applied to retrospective data derived from female interviews. These methods are well designed to handle censoring as a result of the timing of the interview as well as censoring due to the death of the husband. There is, however, no appropriate way to account for possible differences in female mortality by marital status because women who died between the two waves were simply not re-interviewed. This bias may not be as innocent as it seems. In an era of high HIV prevalence, both marital stability and AIDS mortality can become functions of extra-marital sexual activity. The most obvious effect of such an association would be the underestimation of divorce in a cross-sectional sample. Though there is little more we can do at this stage than acknowledge the problem; subsequent rounds of data collection in the MDICP will allow for a longitudinal analysis of divorce and this problem will be overcome.

Another source of bias is caused by differences in the propensity to migrate by marital status. To the extent that marriages involve partners from different locations, marriage breakup almost automatically leads to migration. In the most obvious scenario, the residence of one of the spouses will not change while the other moves back to the village where he or she came from, or, to another place altogether. Because the MDICP sample sites are situated in rural areas, post-divorce migration out of the sample sites leads to an underestimation of divorce. Of all women interviewed in the first round of the MDICP, about 15 percent could not be retrieved in the second round because of migration-related causes. In addition, there is a logical reason to believe that these post-divorce migration patterns are linked to sex and the residence pattern after marriage. Where residence after marriage is virilocal, women are more likely to move out whereas husbands are expected to head off if residence is uxorilocal. In southern local narratives, it is often said that the man is supposed to “leave with his blanket”, meaning that he is not only expected to leave after divorce, but that he cannot claim any material goods from the household –except for his blanket– nor the custody over the children (Zulu 1996). This logic would lead us to expect sex-based differences in divorce-related migration out of the different sample districts. Even though the observed differences in the loss of follow-up between the three districts point in that direction (i.e., slightly higher loss of follow-up in Rumphu and Mchinji than in Balaka), it is not statistically significant. The attrition is nonetheless responsible for a slight underestimation of divorce probabilities. It is much less certain whether or not these biases affect parameter estimates in a multivariate analysis (Alderman et al. 2001, Bignami et al. in this volume).

Other confounding factors are related to the retrospective nature of the survey. This may involve a bias in the definition of what a marriage constitutes if asked to evaluate retrospectively, and, partly related to that, the omission of early and

unsuccessful marriages by older women (Brandon 1990). In addition, there are the sources of bias common to most surveys in developing countries such as the misreporting of ages and timing of events. To minimize the number of individuals with missing ages, the interviewers were instructed to probe. No such procedure was followed for ‘age at marriage’, and the number of missing values on that variable is considerable.

### **3. Variables and expected outcomes**

To organize the discussion of possible determinants of divorce, I build on the argument of Murphy (1985) that less volitional factors (e.g., social class and religion) are not as powerful predictors of marital breakdown as behavioral aspects within the couple’s realm of control. Among the latter, he cites age at marriage, childbearing patterns, the type of wedding ceremony, etc. What Murphy calls “less volitional characteristics”, I will label individual characteristics. The variables that Murphy identifies as “volitional” characterize couples rather than individuals. Here, they will be labeled couple or marriage characteristics and deal with the residence pattern of the household after marriage, the usual place of residence of the husband, ethnic homogamy and polygyny.

At least conceptually, appropriate models should account for the context wherein individuals grow up and wherein marital decisions are taken. In the present discussion, these could refer to the kinship and descent system, customs with regard to the division of property, legal constraints, agricultural systems, and possibly others. Most of these data are not available, but I will use district to account for the heterogeneity in the context wherein marriage decisions are taken.

In the next section, an overview of individual and couple characteristics will be presented with a discussion of their effects as reported in the literature. Table 1 at the end of the section summarizes the distribution of these characteristics in the three sample districts.

#### **3.1. Individual characteristics**

##### **Birth cohort**

To examine a possible evolution over time, the most logical choice would be to control for differences in the risk of divorce by marriage cohort. In the analyses presented here, preference was given to year of birth. This choice was driven by a concern to reduce the number of missing observations. Because the variance in age at first marriage (both

over time and between districts) is fairly limited, we can use birth cohort as a substitute for marriage cohort.

## **Education**

Education is often used as a proxy for female empowerment. Results for the effect of education on marital stability in Africa are, however, not always easy to interpret. In some cases the relationship between female education and divorce is found to be positive (Isiugo-Abanihe 1998). Under other circumstances its influence appears to be non-linear, with the lowest divorce rates observed among uneducated women and among the highest educational groups (Brandon 1990; Tilson and Larsen 2000, Takyi 2001).

In this study, a distinction will be made between women who had at least three years of education and those with less or no education at all. Three years of education is the median value for the sample distribution. The effects of more precise categorizations for educational attainment were tested but the results were similar.

## **Religion**

With regard to Africa, scholars often associate Christianity with an ideational change increasing women's autonomy. Most often this is suggested in connection with elevated levels of education through the establishment of missionary schools (Lesthaeghe et al. 1989). It remains nonetheless questionable to what extent the conversion to Christianity (or Islam) had an emancipating effect on women's position and to what extent these imported religions introduced values that accentuate the subordinate position of women in the household or society. Though there may be other examples, the promotion of the patriarchal (and sometimes also nuclear) family was one of the important vocations of the early Christian (and Islamic) missionaries. In matrilineal populations this obviously happened to the detriment of women's position (Peters 1997, Phiri 1983).

A review of the empirical results on the association between religious practice and marital instability reveals some inconsistencies. Most often, Muslim unions are found to be more stable (Isiugo-Abanihe 1998, Tilson and Larsen 2000), but Brandon (1990) identifies the opposite pattern in Nigeria. In a discussion of declining divorce rates among Muslims in Southeast Asia, Jones (1997) maintains that declining divorce rates were accompanied, and possibly also caused, by trends in more rigorous religious practices.

It is thus difficult to make generalizations of the impact of various religions in different contexts, and in places where significant effects are found it is not always clear whether they are positively associated to either women's empowerment, a greater moral or normative restraint, or even the suppression of women's rights. In the analyses that follow, a distinction is made between Christians, Muslims, and a residual category that contains both traditional African religions and Africanized Christian churches. The latter separated from the mainstream churches and have a more relaxed attitude to local practices such as polygyny.

### **3.2. Couple characteristics**

#### **Residence after marriage and the co-residence of spouses**

Post-marital residence patterns may be important covariates of marriage stability. On the one hand, there is the issue of living patrilocally or matrilocally. The distinction made in the MDICP surveys is virilocal versus uxorilocal and neolocal residence. Another aspect of residence is whether or not the husband usually co-resides with his wife.

In populations with matrilineal descent systems, matrilocal residence after marriage is often the prescription (Note 5). These unions are thought to be inherently unstable because the husband is separated from the base of his authority in his own village. In the village of his wife, he is subordinate to her kin group. In practice, men are sometimes capable of bending these prescriptions to their advantage. In the past, marrying a slave was one of the options. Nowadays he could resort to cross-cousin marriage, a marriage within the same village or neighborhood, or simply renegotiate the residence pattern after a couple of years of marriage (Phiri 1983). In the analyses that follow, a distinction is made between couples that initially lived virilocally after marrying and those that did not. The majority of the latter lived uxorilocally. No information is available on whether the couple moved during their marriage.

Co-residence (Note 6) measures a related though different aspect of marriage dynamics that could be related to marriage stability (Locoh and Thariat 1995). The absence of co-residence of the spouses can have different causes. If the household is established in the wife's village, the husband may decide to spend some time in his own village. In case the husband is polygynous and the different spouses do not live together, he will divide his time between the different households (Note 7). Internal and international labor migration may also contribute to the absence of co-residence, but the MDICP data do not contain information on the migration experience of previous husbands.

### **Ethnic endogamy**

In rural areas, ethnic endogamy is reported to have a positive effect on marriage stability (Locoh and Thiriat 1995). The presumed logic is that ethnic endogamous marriages are more securely embedded in existing social relations and normative prescriptions, and therefore less likely to dissolve.

### **Age at (1st) marriage and the age difference between spouses**

Although age at marriage is complicated by the same measurement issues as marriage period, it is introduced in the later stages of the analysis as an additional control variable. Higher ages at marriage are typically thought of as an indicator of female autonomy or female empowerment. In a review of the evidence from Islamic Southeast Asia, Jones (1997) explicitly links increasing ages at marriage to a greater degree of self-arrangement of marriages, and that is considered a powerful mechanism of declining divorce rates.

Age at marriage is often found to have a considerable positive effect on marriage stability, both in a Western context (Murphy 1985, Martin and Bumpass 1989) and in African populations (Locoh and Thiriat 1995). Isiugo-Abanihe (1988) did not find a significant effect. I will test for a non-linear effect of age at marriage, because it can be assumed that the positive effect of age at marriage on marriage stability decreases with an increasing age at marriage.

Just as a young age at marriage, a greater age difference between spouses is sometimes considered characteristic of a subordinate position of women within the household. A distinction will be made between couples where the husband is at least seven years older and the others.

### **Polygyny**

In a study in Nigeria, the highest divorce rates were found in monogamous marriages and in polygynous unions with three wives or more. Unions where two women share one husband are reported to be most stable (Brandon 1990, Gage-Brandon 1992). Instead of classifying unions in terms of the number of co-wives or the rank order of the wife, two dummy variables are used. The first identifies women who marry into households where at least one other wife is present at the time of marriage. The other variable indicates whether or not the husband married an additional wife during their marriage.

## **Childlessness**

Because of the value attached to children, barrenness is often considered an important cause of marriage instability in many African populations (e.g., Van de Walle 1968, Fortes 1978, Larsen 1989, Isiugo-Abanihe 1988, Takyi 2001). Even though there is no doubt that childlessness may exert considerable pressure on unions, the importance of sterility or subfecundity as an explanatory factor for high levels of divorce or differentials in divorce rates is much more uncertain. Usually it is accepted that around 3 percent of couples are sterile from the beginning of the reproductive period and remain childless (Bongaarts and Potter 1983). Though regional variations in sterility or subfecundity may be substantial because of differences in the prevalence of venereal diseases and female circumcision (Larsen 1989), the MDICP data do not suggest such a pattern in the study areas under consideration: of all women aged 35-44, only 1.3 percent never had a child and the differences between the three districts were minimal. It must be remarked that these figures are rather low. In any case, primary female sterility does not seem to be an important issue for the present analysis. Subfecundity may be of greater relevance, but that, in part, is also a factor of other variables that will be included in the analysis: polygyny and co-residence of the spouses (Note 8).

More problematic is the virtual impossibility of separating the effect of sterility or subfecundity from other associations between childlessness and marital instability. One of the factors that attenuate the risk of divorce once a union is blessed with children is that, in case of a divorce, women may lose custody over their children. This involves not only the rupture of emotional ties but possibly also a source of support at older age. In these circumstances (which may characterize populations with patrilineal descent systems to a greater extent), the stabilizing mechanism is not fecundity but the added benefit of children to the wife if the marriage remains intact. Methodologically, the entanglement of both effects is not such an issue because they operate in the same direction and can properly be dealt with in proportional hazards models. Of greater concern is the possible reversal of the causal order if marital instability contributes to deferring, or even prevents, childbearing (Murphy 1985). Under these circumstances, we should be cautious in interpreting the parameter estimates of models that incorporate childlessness as an independent variable.

Using the MDICP data, it is possible to distinguish fertile from childless unions. A handicap, however, is that it is impossible to estimate the birth interval between marriage and first birth. We thus cannot incorporate it as a time-dependent covariate.

### **3.3. Omitted variables and effects**

A flaw in the analyses presented here is the absence of a good economic indicator of the wealth of the household and sources of income of both partners during their marriage. As mentioned before, the information on marital histories is collected through retrospective questions. No retrospective information was obtained for economic indicators that could be useful in the present analyses. As more rounds of the MDICP will be completed, these measures will become available for inclusion in a longitudinal analysis of divorce (Note 9).

Ethnicity was omitted because it is a quasi-linear combination of other variables discussed so far (e.g., district, religion, residence after marriage).

In research on marital instability in the United States, pre-marital conceptions are often found to contribute to marital instability (Morgan and Rindfuss 1985, Billy and Landsdale 1986). An analogous hypothesis would be more problematic in an African context because pre-marital conceptions could as well increase a woman's desirability since they serve as a proof of her fecundability. In other circumstances a conception may become an important criterion to formalize the union. It is therefore not surprising that empirical results are not always clearly interpretable (e.g., Brandon 1990). The MDICP survey does not offer a good measure of pre-marital conceptions. The effect of an indicator that measures whether the first sexual partner was the one the respondent eventually married was tested, but it did not have a significant effect.

Although extra marital affairs, just as other behavioral characteristics such as alcohol abuse may be the direct causes for divorce (Note 10), they have been omitted from the present analysis because the information is either not available, or, because the reliability of this information is questionable.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. The distribution of individual and couple characteristics by district and marriage order**

Table 1 summarizes the distribution of most variables discussed so far by district and marriage order (Note 11). Divorce is most common in Balaka (first two rows). Since these figures reflect current marital status, they are influenced by the frequency and speed of remarriage. Note that the figures for Balaka are much higher than those reported for the country as a whole (see Figure 1). The level of divorce in Rumphu and Mchinji is close to the national average.

Rumphi is clearly the district with the highest educational levels. Although the north is often considered less developed, the establishment of an educational system with more extensive coverage is presumably the legacy of Protestant missionary settlement in colonial times. Catholic missionaries in the center of the country have put less of an effort into the development of an educational system (Zulu 1996). For political and ideological reasons, far fewer missionary schools were established in predominantly Muslim areas (Bone 2000). The imbalance in the educational infrastructure is still not rectified; the low levels of educational attainment in the south (Balaka) testify to that. The somewhat higher mean age at marriage in Rumphi is related to these higher levels of schooling. In a simple linear regression model, women with at least three years of education are on average nine months older when they marry than those with less or no schooling.

Table 1 also suggests an association between polygyny and kinship system. In the north (Rumphi) where residence after marriage is often virilocal, polygynous unions are more common, and the reverse is true for Balaka (Note 12). Even though this relationship is statistically significant, it is less deterministic than one might expect: where residence after marriage is virilocal, 33 percent of the women are married into a polygynous household; where residence is uxorilocal, 27 percent of the first marriages of women are with a polygynous husband ( $\Phi = .1$ ,  $p < .02$ ).

The co-residence of spouses does not vary much by district, but it is striking that 20 percent of the married women report that their husband is usually absent. In Rumphi, the age difference between the spouses is significantly higher than in the other two districts. This is in part accounted for by a higher frequency of polygynous unions in the north. Mchinji stands out as the district with the highest frequency of ethnic heterogeneous marriages.



**Table 1:** *Individual and couple characteristics by district and marriage order*

	Balaka N=443	Mchinji N=466	Rumphi N=433
% currently divorced by age group			
20-24	10.6	5.0	3.4
45-49	22.2	9.4	11.3
% with three years of schooling or more	23.5	53.0	93.3
Religion			
% Christian*	24.7	52.4	51.9
% Muslim	70.1	0.1	0.0
Mean age at 1st marriage (women, ever married) **	17.5	17.5	18.3
Coresidence of the spouses (in %)			
1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	81.3	83.1	77.6
2 <sup>nd</sup> marriage	81.9	82.1	80.2
Residence after marriage (% living virilocally)			
1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	23.6	72.6	83.1
2 <sup>nd</sup> marriage	18.0	47.6	74.6
Polygynous husband (in %)			
1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	22.6	28.1	40.7
2 <sup>nd</sup> marriage	38.7	47.9	65.6
Age difference between spouses > 6 years (in %)			
1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	33.7	31.9	51.1
2 <sup>nd</sup> marriage	37.7	29.6	45.9
Ethnic homogeneous marriage (in %)			
1 <sup>st</sup> marriage	74.6	68.3	83.8
2 <sup>nd</sup> marriage	68.2	54.4	70.5

Notes:

\* Excluding Africanized Christian churches. They account for most of the residual category.

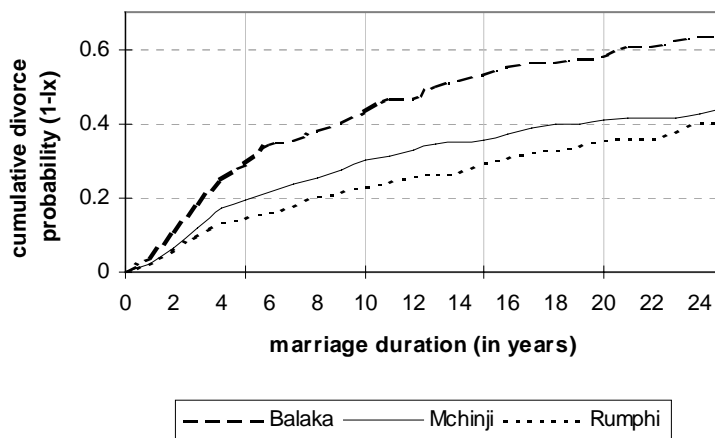
\*\* Because of the relatively high number of missing values (8.5%), these figures should only be considered as indicative. Missing values are concentrated among women of older ages.

The percentage of co-residing spouses and the age difference between the partners remain virtually the same in second compared to first marriages. More interesting is that a greater percentage of women marry a polygynous husband as their second spouse and

a lower percentage of women live virilocally in their second marriage. If both polygyny and virilocal residence are disadvantageous to female empowerment, these trends appear contradictory. One possible explanation is that there exist two groups of women with diverging marriage trajectories: on the one hand a group of women that improve their position from one marriage to the next in the sense that they less often live patrilocally and on the other hand a group of women who have to settle more often for a polygamous husband. The first of these confirms the suggestion of Locoh and Thiriat (1995) that women use divorce and remarriage as empowering strategies throughout their lifecourse, the latter contradicts that same hypothesis. This issue will be taken up again later in this paper.

#### **4.2. First marriages: life table analysis**

Before elaborating on the net effects of the potential determinants of divorce, it is worth looking at the cumulative divorce probabilities in the three districts (Figure 3). The overall levels of divorce are not only high, but the discrepancy between the different areas is striking. In Balaka, close to one-third of first marriages do not survive their fifth anniversary. After 25 years, almost 65 percent of the first marriages have been dissolved. The comparable figures for Rumphi are 14 and 40 percent. Though still uncontrolled for other factors, these differences are highly statistically significant. In evaluating this figure, we must keep in mind that these data only apply to rural areas. In addition, we have good reasons to believe that the divorce probabilities in the MDICP data are underestimates of their real values because of the sample design. As mentioned before, this bias may be higher for Mchinji and Rumphi than for Balaka, and that may attenuate the observed regional differences somewhat.



**Figure 2:** Life table divorce probabilities for first marriages by marriage duration and district (N=1322, 20 missing values)

To get a clearer picture of the exceptionally high figures in the MDICP sample, a comparison with similar data for other countries might be in order. For the three districts combined, 45 percent of the marriages end in divorce within 20 years. In Ethiopia, a country where the divorce rate is considered to be high, 40 percent of the marriages do not last for longer than 20 years (Tilson and Larsen 2000). Similar - though older- data for three West African countries are considerably lower: 32 percent in Cote d'Ivoire, 33 percent in Ghana, and 14 percent in Nigeria (Brandon 1990). In contrast to the Malawian data, these are national level data that also represent urban areas. All the figures cited here neutralize the possible confounding effect of widowhood.

One of the objectives of the analysis that follows is to determine whether the differences between the three districts persist once we have controlled for individual and couple characteristics.

#### 4.3. First marriages: multivariate analysis

The variables discussed earlier have been used to fit four Cox regression models with the likelihood of divorce as the outcome variable. In the presence of censoring (due to

the mortality of the husband and the timing of the interview), life table techniques are well suited to calculate divorce probabilities by duration of marriage and one or two classificatory characteristics. Proportional hazard models are more appropriate to highlight potential differences in the risk of divorce by a wider number of explanatory variables. The hazard of divorce for an individual at time  $t$  is a function of a baseline hazard function that is left unspecified, and a linear function of a set of fixed covariates that are exponentiated (Allison 1995). Table 2 summarizes the hazard ratios for the different models. The hazard ratios ( $e^{\beta}$ ) can be interpreted as the ratio of the estimated hazard for those with value 1 to the reference category. For quantitative covariates, we subtract 1 from the hazard ratio and multiply by 100 to obtain the estimated percent change in the hazard rate for each one-unit increase in the covariate (Allison 1995).

In model 1, only contextual (district) and individual variables are considered. As can be seen from the  $R^2$  value, its explanatory power is relatively small. Model 2 acknowledges the effect of couple characteristics and has significantly more potential in clarifying determinants of divorce. Models 3 and 4 add age at marriage and the childlessness of the union as two additional explanatory variables. Models with interactions between marriage duration, district, and the polygyny variables were tested but turned out not significant.

Controlling only for individual characteristics, the hazard of divorce is almost twice as high in Balaka as in Rumphi. Additional controls for couple or marriage characteristics reduces the effect of district but it remains significant. It is particularly the difference between Balaka and Rumphi that accounts for that, but the difference between Balaka and Mchinji is also statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ).

In model 2, an increase of one year in the year of birth increases the likelihood of divorce by 1.5 percent. Even though this effect is substantial and suggests that divorce has increased over time (Note 13), the source of this effect may be caused by the omission of early unsuccessful marriages by older women. A similar distortion has been reported by Brandon (1990). For that reason, the result obtained here is not a sound basis for rejecting Kaler's (2001) suggestion that there has been little, if not no, increase in the frequency of divorce over time. These results do not offer a confirmation of such a thesis either.

Education does not seem to have an effect on divorce hazards. In interpreting these results, we should remember that the variance in educational attainment in the sample sites is limited and highly correlated with district (see also Table 1). We thus have little leverage to observe significant results even if they existed.

When compared to African and Africanized religions, Christianity reduces the likelihood of divorce. The effect of being Muslim tends to operate in the same direction, but is less consistent.

**Table 2:** Hazard ratios for Cox regression models of 1<sup>st</sup> marriage dissolution<sup>o</sup>

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>District</b>				
Balaka	2.132***	1.617***	1.749***	1.563**
Mchinji	1.129	1.097	1.107	1.057
Rumphi	-	-	-	-
<b>Individual characteristics</b>				
Year of birth	1.010**	1.015***	1.019***	1.017***
Female education				
> 3 years	1.057	1.036	1.116	1.135
<= 3 years	-	-	-	-
Religion				
Christian	0.512***	0.586***	0.567***	0.557***
Muslim	0.565**	0.760	0.579***	0.534***
Other (traditional)	-	-	-	-
<b>Marriage and couple characteristics</b>				
Residence of the household				
Uxorilocal & neolocal		1.316***	1.295**	1.290**
Virilocal		-	-	-
Usual place of stay of the husband				
In the household		0.316***	0.295***	0.327***
Somewhere else		-	-	-
Age difference between spouses				
> 6 years		0.569***	0.555***	0.575***
<= 6 years		-	-	-
Ethnic homogeneous marriage				
Yes		0.802*	0.791*	0.760**
No		-	-	-
Co-wives present at marriage				
Yes		1.412***	1.550***	1.465***
No		-	-	-
Husband married additional wives				
Yes		0.790**	0.849	0.837
No		-	-	-
Age at marriage			0.989	0.978
Age at marriage (Sq)			1.003**	1.002
Children in union				
Yes				0.230***
No				-
N (missing values)	1322 (20)	1297 (45)	1206 (136)	1200 (142)
Likelihood Ratio Chi Square	69.25	244.92	236.88	308.46
Df	6	12	14	15
R <sup>2</sup>	0.05	0.17	0.18	0.23

Notes:

\*\*\* p < 0.01, \*\* p < 0.05, \* p < 0.1. Huber-White corrections are applied to the standard errors to account for unobserved heterogeneity at the village level.

<sup>o</sup> The R<sup>2</sup> reported at the bottom of Table 2 was originally proposed by Cox and Snell and is calculated as:

$$R^2 = 1 - e^{\left(-\frac{G^2}{n}\right)}$$

where n stands for the sample size and G<sup>2</sup> for the likelihood ratio chi square statistic for testing the null hypothesis that all effects are 0 (Allison 1995). The Cox models ignore unobserved population heterogeneity. If anything, it will bias parameters towards 0 (Vaupel and Yashin 1999)

Because of their proximity to marriage stability, couple characteristics yield more clearly identifiable effects. In line with the structural anthropological argument, virilocal residence after marriage is associated with more stable marriages. The co-residence of the spouses is, however, a much stronger covariate than the location of the household. The risk of divorce for marriages where partners co-reside is only one-third of what it is when the husband is usually absent. This is by far the strongest effect of any of the variables in model 2. This is not surprising since co-residence by itself may already be an indicator of marriage instability. On the other hand, the absence of the husband may give rise to suspicion about his whereabouts and fidelity or complaints about his contributions to the household's income. If the absence of co-residence is related to migration, then this also suggests that the frailty of unions is dependent on the economic circumstances of the household and on migration as a coping strategy thereof. Most of the interpretations of this effect are necessarily speculative because no precise information about the reasons for the absence of co-residence is available.

A large age difference between spouses significantly reduces the risk of divorce and may be an indication of a greater submissiveness of women to the authority of their husband. Ethnically homogenous marriages are also less likely to end up in divorce. The greater stability of these marriages is consistent with results from previous research (Locoh and Thiriart 1995).

The polygyny indicators yield interesting results. When a woman marries into a household where other wives are present, the risk of divorce increases. If the husband, on the contrary, marries an additional wife during their marriage, the risk of marriage dissolution is attenuated. The first observation points to an often-suggested characteristic of polygynous households with competition between wives and greater marriage instability. Marrying into a household where other women are present also implies that the woman's position is of a lower rank (2nd at best) and that seems to negatively affect stability. The reasons for the stabilizing effect of the husband marrying additional wives are twofold. First, it implies that the wife is of a higher rank than the incoming woman and may therefore enjoy higher status and possibly power within the household. In addition, marrying an additional wife may be considered an alternative to divorce. If the husband, for example, suspects his wife to be barren or if she only bears him daughters, he may force her to accept an additional wife in exchange for not being divorced.

Age at marriage has only been introduced at a later stage of the analysis because of the great number of missing values for that variable. In model 3, the effect of age at marriage (non-linear) indicates that the risk of divorce decreases as the age at marriage increases but at a decreasing rate.

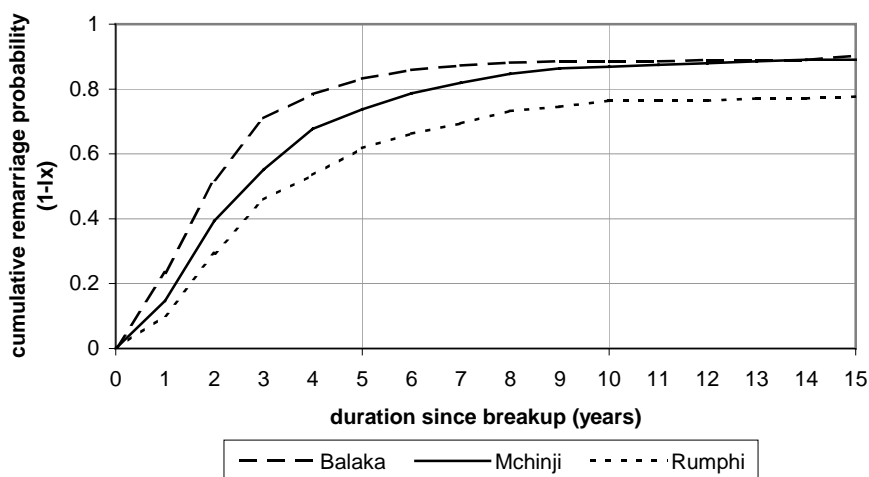
The effect of childlessness is very strong and highly significant. Because of the reservations raised earlier, it is not clear whether it is worthwhile to attach a lot of

importance to that effect. Interesting, nevertheless, is that even in the presence of this control, the effects of the other variables remain within the same order of magnitude. Only the squared age term loses statistical significance.

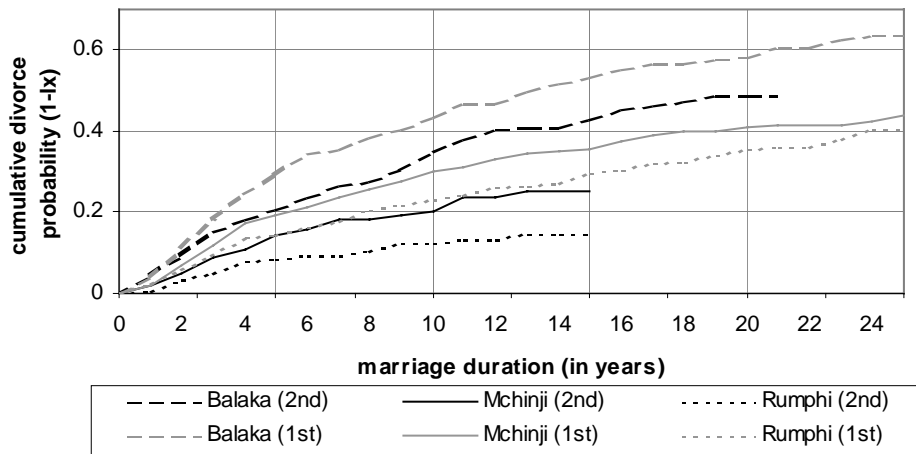
#### 4.4. Remarriage and the instability of higher-order marriages

Remarriage is almost universal. Over 40 percent of the women remarry within 2 years after a divorce; that figure increases steadily to reach 75 percent after 5 years and close to 90 percent after 10 years. Remarriage is significantly slower among widowed women and reaches a maximum of just over 70 percent. These differences are statistically significant and partly accounted for by the fact that widowed women are, on average, somewhat older and therefore less likely to remarry (not shown).

Remarriage probabilities also vary by district. This is visible in Figure 3. In Balaka, where divorce is more common, remarriage occurs faster. Especially when contrasted with Rumphi, it is also more universal: over 90 percent as compared to 78 percent.



**Figure 3:** Remarriage by duration since marriage breakup (N=567, 43 missing values)



**Figure 4:** Cumulative divorce probabilities for 1st and higher-order marriages by district ( $N=601$ , 9 missing values)

Via a proportional hazards model, it was tested whether the differences between the regions persist after controlling for the outcome of the first marriage (divorced versus widowed), but they remained virtually unchanged (not shown).

In Figure 4, the cumulative divorce probabilities for first and second marriages are compared. In all three districts, the probability of divorce in higher-order marriages is lower than for first marriages. The difference is a little more accentuated for Rumphi than for the other two districts. This finding contradicts observations for the United States where the divorce rate is higher for second than for first marriages (Martin and Bumpass 1989).

A proportional hazards model with the outcome of second marriages was tested with the same independent variables as in Model 2 for first marriages. A general tendency in the results was a reduction in the effects of most variables. With the exception of the co-residence of the spouses, none of the independent variables had a statistically significant effect. Just as for first marriages, co-residence reduces the risks of divorce considerably.

Noteworthy perhaps is the reversal of the effect for women who marry into a household where another wife is already present. For first marriages this tended to increase the hazard of divorce significantly; in second or higher-order marriages it



seems to have a stabilizing effect. Because the relatively high standard error of that estimate, we cannot be sure whether the reversal is reflecting a true pattern. In addition to the variables mentioned previously, the effect of the outcome of the first marriage (ended in divorce or through widowhood) was tested. While higher- order marriages of previously divorced women seem to be less stable, its effect was again not statistically significant. Our inability to identify significant effects may indicate that this analysis lacks statistical power (Note 14).

#### **4.5. Divorce and remarriage as empowering strategies**

So far the analyses have highlighted some of the correlates of divorce, but they have hardly clarified the place of marriage and divorce in the life course of women. A focus on the latter is essential for understanding the possible role of marriage and divorce as an empowering strategy in women's lives in the sense that it was advanced by Locoh and Thiriat (1995). Here, I consider the residence of the household after marriage as an empowering factor. It is assumed that patrilocal (or virilocal) residence is disadvantageous to women because it implies that they come under the direct control of their husband and his kin. If residence after marriage is matri- or uxorilocal, women's position is more securely embedded in the social relationships with her own kin and therefore likely to be to her advantage. Such an interpretation is subject to the critique of reading too much significance into the residence of the household and therefore it should only be considered as an initial attempt at gaining an understanding of divorce and remarriage as strategic choices that women deploy throughout their lives. In a very analogous manner, the discussion that follows assumes that women, on average, prefer a monogamous over a polygynous husband.

The analysis consists of two steps. First, a simple comparison of first and second marriages is made in terms of marriage type (polygynous/monogamous) and residence pattern (table 3). This is comparable to the figures presented in table 1, but to avoid possible selection effects, the sample is now restricted to women who married at least twice. Table 3 confirms the bifurcation of marriage outcomes for women. On the one hand, women more often marry a polygynous husband in higher order marriages (from 29 to 48%). At the same time, they more often succeed to avoid living virilocally in higher order marriages (from 52 to 59%). The latter is possibly related to the fact spouses in a polygynous household do not always co-reside. The row percentages in table 3 indicate that this can only be part of the explanation because the proportion of women living uxorilocally increases for all women, whether their husband is polygynous or not.

**Table 3:** *Women's residence after marriage, by marriage type (polygynous/monogamous) and marriage order (observed row % and marginal distributions)\**

	1st marriage			2nd marriage		
	Uxorilocal (or neolocal)	Virilocal	Total	Uxorilocal (or neolocal)	Virilocal	Total
Monogamous	55	45	71	67	33	52
Polygynous	43	57	29	51	49	48
Total	52	48	100	59	41	100

Note.

\* The sample is restricted to women who married at least twice. N=533 (12 missing values)

**Table 4:** *Odds ratios for a GEE logistic regression with uxoriocal (and neolocal) versus virilocal residence as the outcome, and marriage order, district and marriage type as the explanatory variables\**

	District		
	Balaka	Mchinji	Rumphi
2nd marriage vs 1st marriage	1.7	1.7	1.7
Marriage type			
Monogamous – coresiding	7.7	1.7	0.5
Monogamous – not coresiding	6.1	0.9	1.2
Polygynous – coresiding	6.1	1.0	0.2
Polygynous – not coresiding	6.0	1.8	1.0

Note:

\* The analysis is restricted to women who married at least twice. N=533 (21 missing values). GEE (generalized estimating equations) was chosen to adjust the standard errors for the dependence among observations (Allison 1999). LR Chi-square: 284.9, df: 12,  $p < .01$ . The effects of marriage order and the interaction between marriage type and district are significant at the 5%-level.

The relationship between residence after marriage and marriage type is further explored in a second step that includes additional controls for the co-residence of the spouses and district. This is done via a logistic regression model that predicts uxoriocal residence after marriage (table 4). The analysis essentially confirms that uxoriocal residence after marriage is more common in higher order than in first marriages. The interaction between marriage type and district further illustrates that uxoriocal residence is more common in Balaka and that the co-residence of the spouses is a good predictor of virilocal residence in Rumphi, and particularly so if the husband is polygamous. The interaction between marriage order and marriage type is not significant, meaning that the effect of marriage order on residence after marriage is similar across marriage types.

So in terms of the Locoh-Thiriat hypothesis that divorce is used by women as a strategy to improve their position throughout their life course, we only get a partial

confirmation. On the one hand, women's 'value' on the marriage market seems to decrease and a greater proportion is remarrying a polygamous husband. On the other hand, those women who manage to remarry monogamously seem to escape to a greater extent the control of their in-laws. Herein we find some evidence for the Locoh-Thiriati hypothesis.

## 5. Conclusion

Marriage in Malawi is a fragile institution. Especially in Balaka, the divorce probabilities must be among the highest recorded on the continent. The anthropological argument that divorce is more common in populations with matrilineal descent systems only partly accounts for the observed differences between the three districts. Elevated to a higher level of abstraction, this observation nonetheless offers support for the idea that marriage instability is positively correlated with female empowerment. The effect of the age difference between spouses operates in the same direction. Less strong evidence could be found for the hypothesis that female empowerment stabilizes the marital bond. The few indications pointing in that direction are that women who marry older are less likely to divorce, and the observation that monogamous marriages are more stable. The effect of the polygyny variables, however, highlights more intricate relationships that reflect both the position of the woman vis-à-vis her co-wives and the relationship with her husband. Although not directly measured, we also find indications that point to the role of labor migration in marriage instability.

The role of marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the life course of women is also fascinating and deserves greater attention than could be given here. For now, it appears that women more often marry a polygynous husband in higher-order compared to first marriages. To the extent that this is undesirable, it indicates that divorced women lose value on the marriage market. At the same time, women more often live uxorilocally in higher-order marriages. This is true for both women who remarry a monogamous or a polygamous husband, but in the latter case (particularly in Rumphu) it often means that the spouses do not co-reside. Together, these observations suggest the existence of diverging patterns between a group of women who gain through divorce and remarriage and a group of women who seem having to settle for less in higher-order marriages.

If thinking in terms of power and empowerment, the perspective that considers marriage and divorce as active strategies deployed throughout the life course as part of a negotiating process for power is an important addition to the static view that appreciates power solely as an outcome or determinant of marital stability. In an analogous manner, marriage and divorce can become tools at the disposal of individuals for managing risk or insecurity. Risk to the exposure of HIV/AIDS is one such issue.

Divorce may offer protection against HIV if the spouse is suspected of having extra-marital affairs; (re)marriage potentially has the same effect because it is likely to reduce the frequency of casual relationships. The expansion of the HIV/AIDS pandemic could thus become a contributing factor for seemingly growing divorce rates in Malawi and/or the persistence of the differences between the three districts studied here. Such conclusions, however, require great interpretative leaps and necessarily remain speculative.

## **6. Acknowledgements**

This paper greatly benefited from comments by Susan Watkins, Etienne van de Walle, Victor Agadjanian and Frank Furstenberg.

## Notes

1. A curious bias in the study of marriage in Africa is the more extensive coverage of the ex-colonies of francophone countries (Van de Walle 1968). This predominance of west and central Africa in the demographic analysis of nuptiality seems to have persisted over time (see Bledsoe and Pison 1994).
2. See the introduction to this volume for a detailed description of the MDICP.
3. The formulation of the question in the survey was how the marriage “ended”. “Separation” was listed as a pre-coded answer category in addition to “divorce” and “became a widow”.
4. The total sample size for the second round of the MDICP was 1587 women, but 245 new spouses of the men interviewed in 1998 were excluded because they are believed to be atypical: a disproportionate share of these women is, for example, married to a polygynous husband.
5. Note that matriliney is a complex of several variables that goes beyond residence after marriage. It also includes the exercise of domestic authority and the control or custody over children (Phiri 1983). Residence after marriage is relatively easily measured and that is the aspect that is recorded in the MDICP surveys.
6. In the MDICP survey it was asked whether the husband “usually stayed in the same village” rather than in the same household.
7. For first marriages, only marginal statistical associations exist between co-residence and residence after marriage ( $p=.08$ ), and between co-residence and polygyny ( $p=.04$ ).
8. Another aspect that may be of importance but not dealt with here is whether the divorce probabilities are affected by the sex of the children born during marriage. In populations with a strong preference for sons, women who only bear daughters may be subject to repudiation.
9. Because it can be assumed that land ownership is less variable over time than other sources of income, I tested whether current land ownership by women has an effect on the stability of first marriages. No significant effect was found.
10. In the qualitative projects that accompany the MDICP, extra-marital affairs as well as alcohol abuse were cited as reasons why women divorced and as conditions under which divorce is acceptable or even recommended (Schatz 2002).

11. Due to the design of the questionnaire, information on 2nd marriages was available only for those who married two or three times. For them (N=511), the analyses that follow pertain to 2nd marriages. For women married four times or more (N=22) the analyses that follow pertain to the one but last marriage.
12. Recent estimates of polygyny at the national level are lower than in the MDICP sample. In the 2000 DHS-survey, around 17 percent of the married women and around 9 percent of the men are in polygynous unions (DHS 2001). The discrepancy with the figures presented here is probably due to the selection of the sample sites.
13. A value of 1.015 implies that the divorce hazard is around 16 percent higher for a woman who is 30 compared to one who is 40 years old. In this case, the effect is controlled for other variables in the model. Only controlling for district, the effect is slightly smaller (1.009) but still significant at the 5 percent level.
14. The sample size for the analysis of second marriages is 629, but 74 percent of these observations are censored.

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